

2012 Update from the New York State Assembly



TASK FORCE ON FOOD, FARM AND NUTRITION POLICY

Sheldon Silver, Speaker • Crystal Peoples-Stokes, Chair

Message from the Chair

Dear Friends of Food Policy,

Last year, Speaker Silver appointed me Chair of the Assembly's Task Force on Food, Farm and Nutrition Policy. For those of you who don't know me, I am a Buffalo native and a former Erie County Legislator, who worked to bring a food market, and fresh fruits and vegetables to a "food desert" in my community. I believe I share a commitment with you to ensure that the 141st Assembly district, as well as every community across the state, has access to affordable, safe, quality food, preferably from local farms.

I am especially interested in the following issues:

- the federal and state response regarding the demand for food assistance for struggling families and seniors;
- improving information for food quality and safety for consumers;
- assisting those with nutrition-related health problems such as diabetes and obesity; and,
- building connections between our farmers and urban consumers.

This past year, I advocated for increased funding for food assistance in the State budget and for flood assistance to farmers devastated by last year's hurricanes. The federal Farm Bill is working its way through Congress. I joined Senator Gillibrand to fight proposed SNAP (formerly Food Stamps) cuts. I also sponsored legislation to encourage increased government purchases of local food and a bill that would create a diabetes prevention program. We held a roundtable meeting to discuss the status of genetically modified foods and will be holding a similar meeting in Buffalo this year.

I am honored that Speaker Silver has asked me to take responsibility for this Task Force and these important statewide issues. I look forward to working with my colleagues in State government, health and nutrition professionals, anti-hunger advocates, farmers, labor and businesses to increase the consumption of New York's homegrown food. As always, please contact me with your comments, suggestions, and ideas.

Crystal Peoples-Stokes
Chair

New York State Food, Farm and Nutrition News

- New York State launched the FreshConnect program to create new farmers' markets and support existing markets that provide fresh produce to high-need areas, as well as other creative solutions to improve access to fresh, locally produced food by low-income or underserved communities. For more information: <http://freshconnect.ny.gov>.
- Last year, the State provided over \$2 million in recovery aid to New York farms affected by Hurricane Irene and Tropical Storm Lee. The funds, part of the Farm Operation Match Component of the Agriculture and Community Recovery Fund (ACRF), went to 240 farms in 39 counties to replace feed for livestock, as well as farm-raised crops for retail and wholesale operations.
- Governor Cuomo announced he will end the finger imaging requirement for all SNAP applicants and recipients, helping simplify the application process, and removing a barrier to reducing hunger among the state's children and adults.
- The "Food Works" plan, developed by the NYC Council, provides a blueprint for addressing food system issues. The proposals focus on combating hunger and obesity, preserving regional farming and local food manufacturing, and decreasing waste and energy usage. For more information: http://www.council.nyc.gov/html/action_center/food.shtml
- NYC's Health Bucks coupon program provides \$2 off fresh fruits and vegetables for each \$5 of SNAP benefits that a customer spends at selected farmers' markets. Some New York State FreshConnect programs also provide similar coupons.

Roundtable on Agriculture Biotechnology, Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) and Food

The Task Force sponsored a roundtable on GMO policy issues in May in the State capital. The discussion was co-sponsored by the Assembly Committees on Agriculture and Consumer Affairs, the Commission on Science and Technology, and the Task Force on University-Industry Cooperation. Roundtable participants included Cornell researchers, representatives of the NY Organic Farming Association (NOFA), NY Farm Bureau, Consumers Union (publisher of Consumer Reports), the Council on Biotechnology Information, and Monsanto.

More than 10 years ago, the Task Force, Committees, and Commission held hearings around the State to hear from supporters and concerned citizens regarding the impacts of GMOs. At that time, genetically modified plants and foods were relatively new. There were many discussions held regarding the future impact GMOs would have on health, agriculture, the environment, and business. Today GMOs are commonly used. For example, over 90% of soybeans and 70% of corn grown in the U.S. are engineered for herbicide-resistance which makes them genetically modified foods.

At the roundtable meeting, supporters of genetically modified plants expressed concerns that government restrictions on biotechnology in New York could put our farmers at a competitive disadvantage with other states that allow their use. The supporters also expressed concern about the difficulty in identifying genetically modified foods because, generally, the proteins that are inserted into plant DNA which modify the genetic makeup are not

included on the final foods or ingredients making GMO foods indistinguishable from non-GMO foods. Consumer and organic food advocates pointed to jurisdictions, including the entire European Union, which require labeling of genetically modified foods based on recordkeeping by producers. Recent surveys reveal overwhelming public support for labeling in NY and across the country.

Assemblymember Peoples-Stokes said, "Many of us weren't here in Albany in 2000, but the concerns surrounding GMOs are still current. This year, California will hold a referendum to allow voters to weigh in on labeling. We need to re-examine all of the concerns expressed a decade ago and pay attention to what is new in the world of genetic engineering. I plan to sponsor additional meetings on this topic to explore how we can properly monitor the safety of this technology for consumers, farmers and the environment and provide label information that the people are demanding."



Assemblymember Peoples-Stokes and her colleagues discussing the regulation of genetically modified food.

Task Force Legislation

For more detail, and updated status, on these bills and any other legislation through the end of 2012, please visit <http://assembly.state.ny.us/leg/> and enter the complete bill number.

New Legislation – 2011-12 Session

A.9031 (Peoples-Stokes)* "Buy from the Backyard Act" would require the Office of General Services and other state agencies to buy 20% of all their food products from producers and/or processors in New York State.

A.10206 (Peoples-Stokes)* Would require reporting on State purchases of available New York food products and inform sellers of the State's interest in such purchases.

A.10406 (Peoples-Stokes) Would establish a diabetes prevention demonstration program.

**The Task Force plans to sponsor a roundtable meeting to discuss the best legislative approach to encouraging improved government procurement of local foods.*

Existing Legislation

A.1367 Provides for the labeling of food products that are genetically modified.

The following Task Force bills, originally introduced in previous years, were signed into law in 2011-12.

A.1025-A/S.627-A Would finance the construction, improvement, expansion, or rehab of wholesale regional farmers' markets and food hubs that promote farm products grown in New York State. *Chapter 298 Laws of 2012.*

A.1389-A/S.614-B Would finance the transportation and distribution of New York State grown farm products to food service markets, especially in underserved communities. *Chapter 454 Laws of 2011.*

A.8005/S.5673 Changes the name of the Food Stamp program to SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), the name adopted by the federal government in the last Farm Bill. *Chapter 41 Laws of 2012.*

Food, Farm and Nutrition Budget Highlights

During the last few years, the State was forced to close multi-billion dollar budget gaps.

In 2011 alone, there was a \$10 billion deficit, which required significant cuts to many programs. Although food assistance and agricultural programs were spared major reductions during the recession, demand for assistance continues to grow, as will the need for additional spending on food and farm priorities.

The 2011-12 and 2012-13 State budgets maintained funding for: the hunger prevention program for food banks, soup kitchens and food pantries; the senior home-delivered meal programs; the WIC nutrition program for infants, young children and their mothers; and, childhood obesity prevention and diabetes prevention. State funding for school meals increased each year to accommodate growth in participation and in 2012-13 funding for nutrition outreach to enroll families in SNAP (Food Stamps) went up by \$1.3

million. The legislature restored funding that was proposed to be cut in both years for the NYS Apple Growers Association, Farm Family Assistance, Farm Viability Institute, Center for Dairy Excellence, and other programs important to farmers.

According to Assemblymember Peoples-Stokes, "We passed good budgets that increased funding for programs to help our most vulnerable citizens, children, struggling working families, and seniors. The Assembly helped to improve the Governor's proposal, including redirecting some funding for different priorities in education and supports for low-income households. The final budgets protected funding for programs that: provide food assistance; prevent nutrition-related problems such as diabetes and obesity that increase spending on hospital and doctor visits; and, help assist farmers in meeting the growing demand for local food."

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